

Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition

By Helen Hughes

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Indigenous affairs policy is a vexed and complex area. No Australian government has ever addressed the complexity of Aboriginal political culture and responded with appropriate and successful policy. The latest monograph from Helen Hughes of the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), *Lands of Shame*, does nothing to develop a more complex response to this policy conundrum. Rather, Hughes's own conservatism, and that of the CIS, blind her to the very nuances she insists have been overlooked in past government policy. This is particularly problematic in light of reports that a draft of the manuscript was sent to an adviser in the Howard government because the author was eager to ensure that her work was supportive of the policy agenda set by the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough.

Hughes's subject is what she describes as the 'shameful living conditions' in 'homeland' communities (homeland is placed in inverted commas throughout the book to signal Hughes's disdain for the term). While many of the problems Hughes observes in these communities are widely known, her diagnosis of their cause — the so-called 'exceptionalist philosophies and separatist policies' that resulted from Nugget Coomb's 'socialist experiment' — is novel. This is not a position that Hughes can sustain, however, not least because of significant flaws in her approach to the argument. Among other things, Hughes persistently skates over the racism that has been and remains a constitutive component of Aboriginal lives and avoids discussion of the well-documented trauma resulting from past government policies that continue to impact upon the mental and physical health of many Indigenous people today. By beginning her section on the historical background to current policy in the 1960s, Hughes conveniently avoids dealing with the myriad harms done to Aboriginal people prior to this.

Hughes's motivation is not in question. The book is evidence of a deep and seemingly genuine concern with the poor living conditions and lack of services in some remote Aboriginal communities. Hughes quite correctly highlights some areas of policy that continue to pose significant problems, both to governments attempting to address them and, more importantly, to the Aboriginal people who have to endure them. Other complex areas of policy, however — such as the issue of local government reform, which is riddled with questions of how to represent small, diverse language groups and their relationships to land — are dealt with in a mere

five pages. The book is also full of puzzling errors or misrepresentations. The CDEP program, for example, is described as having its origins in 'the demeaning proposition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are inherently and ethnically unable to make the same work efforts as other Australians', when in fact the program originated from concerns by senior Aboriginal people that the introduction of universal social security payments would lead to a lack of activity among young people in communities. There are also various lengthy anecdotes, the point of which seems somewhat opaque. The discussion of ranger programs in chapter five, for example, seems to contain an assumption that such programs are futile, but Hughes is never explicit on this point.

The fundamental flaw in Hughes's argument, however, is her confusion of the recognition of cultural difference, and a respect for Aboriginal people's aspirations, with separatism and exceptionalism. Rather than seeing policy such as the recognition of Aboriginal communal interests in land as (albeit inadequate) efforts to accommodate Aboriginal culture and first nations status, Hughes sees all such policy as an ideological imposition that is in fact the cause of Aboriginal disadvantage. Such an approach is at best lazy and at worst downright malicious. It denies Aboriginal people themselves any agency in the negotiation and development of past and current policy, implying instead that they have only ever been passive dupes of a sinister 'socialist' policy agenda. Were this suggestion less offensive, it would be laughable in all its outdated 'reds under the beds' conspiracy theorist overtones. Hughes persistently refers to the homelands as having been 'created' by government policy, making no mention of Aboriginal people's prior residence on these lands or their desire to continue living on and maintaining their land and the cultural obligations attached to it.

Underlying this flaw in Hughes's work is the representation of Aboriginal people as either passive victims, self-serving 'big men' (a group whose membership is undefined and seems to include 'some women' and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma!), or Noel Pearson. Hughes's obsession with the so-called 'big men' is interesting. While there are undoubted problems in some communities where key families dominate access to resources, the point that Hughes is trying to make is unclear. She draws on income statistics from remote areas to point out that a small percentage of people, who she claims are the 'big men', earn high incomes. Hughes argues that 'remuneration for the Indigenous elites reflects their appropriation of a high share of public funding through official positions'. The example she provides, however, is Calma — a Sydney-based traditional owner employed from the public purse like all other HREOC social justice commissioners. Is Hughes suggesting that Calma should be paid less because he is black? Is she suggesting that people in executive positions should not earn high

incomes? Or is she suggesting that Aboriginal people should not be in these positions? Or, if they are, that they should not be paid the same amount as their non-Aboriginal counterparts?

Hughes knows her work is controversial. She devotes a page to outlining criticism of her earlier work in this field before attempting to turn the tables with an ill-judged critique of the work of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. However, she does not acknowledge the ideological bias that taints her own work. She sings the praises of the Howard government's efforts in Indigenous affairs, laying the blame for that government's failings at the feet of a recalcitrant bureaucracy. Labor state and territory governments are lambasted for not trying hard enough. She sings the praises too of Noel Pearson and his Cape York Institute, despite the fact that the vast majority of Aboriginal people have rejected his pronouncements.

In the final analysis, *Lands of Shame* fails to be the definitive critique of remote Aboriginal communities that it sets out to be because, quite simply, it is a poor work of scholarship. The argument is jumbled and at times incoherent. Errors of fact and misrepresentations of Indigenous views are rife. The most frequently cited source in the footnotes is *The Australian* newspaper (over 150 citations). That the book was published at all says much about the standards of the Centre for Independent Studies. That it is alleged to have influenced the policies of the Howard government is frightening. ●

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